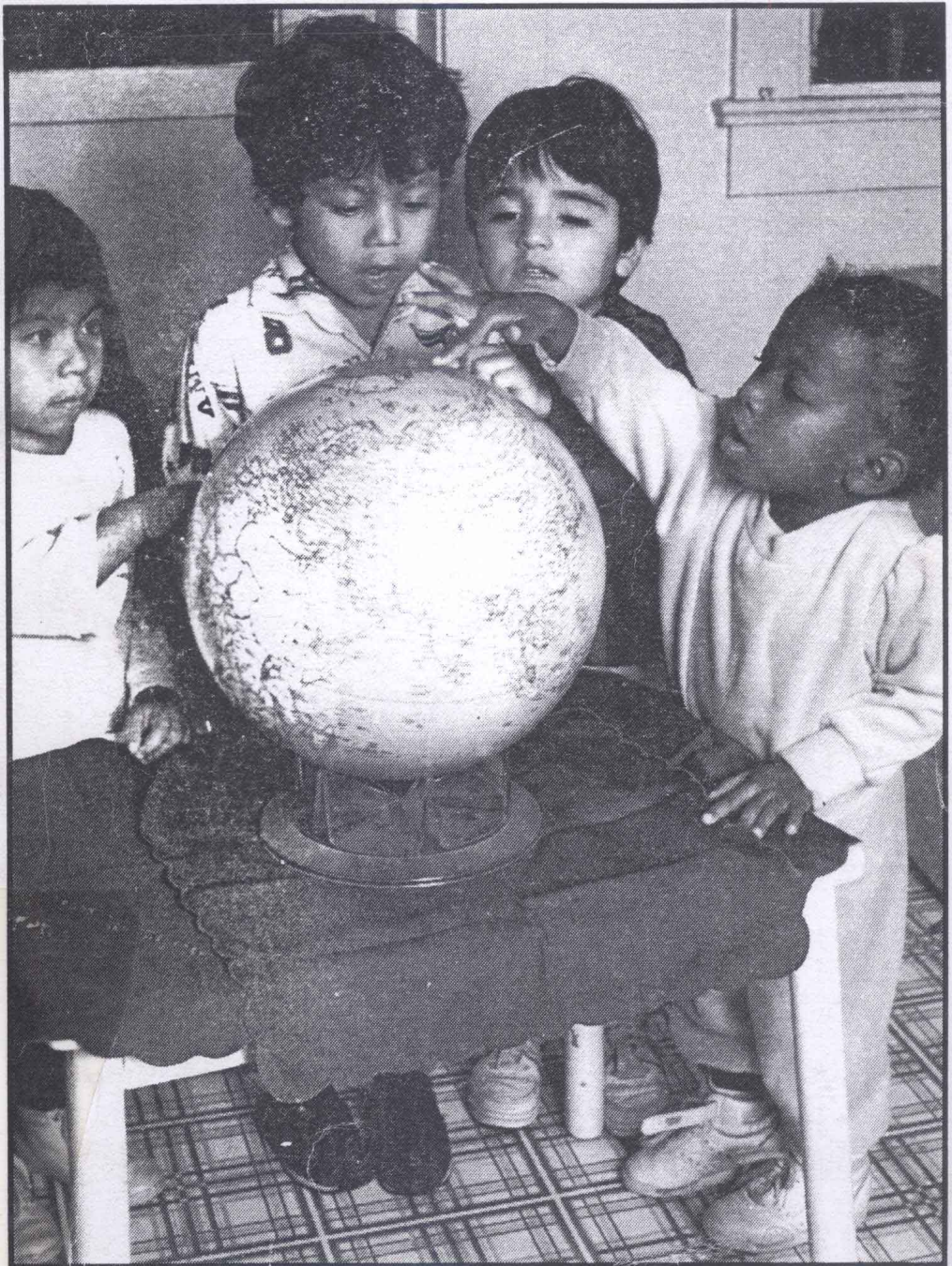


Early Childhood Social Studies

Cynthia S. Sunal



EARLY CHILDHOOD SOCIAL STUDIES

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PREFACE

Early *Childhood Social Studies* takes a developmental viewpoint in considering social studies education for young children. Young children have many opportunities to experience social studies. Their understanding and their capabilities develop and change as they actively explore the social environment.

Because the social world affects all parts of our lives, social studies education should be an integral part of the early childhood curriculum, not be separated from other curricula. As part of the integrated day, social studies affects all that occurs throughout that day. Truly the core of the early childhood curriculum, the social studies define how the child learns to become an active, positive, contributing member of human society.

This book presents three models for teaching social studies to young children, each of which is based on use of the senses, concrete experiences, and opportunities to discuss observations. Although each model addresses a particular level of development, the models can be used as needed with children at differing levels. A model normally appropriate for less mature children may be appropriate for all in an unfamiliar situation, while a model usually appropriate for more mature children may be used for all in a highly familiar situation.

This book focuses on a cognitive developmental approach but incorporates the valuable knowledge derived from social learning theory and behavioral learning theory. It addresses the reality that children grow, change, and think differently as they acquire more and more experience with the world. Research related to a range of social, emotional, and intellectual development theories is incorporated. The eclectic view that most teachers employ—"use what can help"—is important in this book. Although a cognitive developmental approach is the focus of the book, teachers will also want to consider the effects of modeling and behavior modification upon children, as well as other approaches.

Examples are provided for teaching social studies in such traditional subjects as history and geography, as well as in newer themes such as economics and multicultural education. Rather than covering all of the social studies areas, *Early Childhood Social Studies* suggests ways that selected themes within the social studies may be approached in early childhood. Using this framework, teachers should be able to adapt approaches and apply them to other themes within social studies education. Each chapter gives useful and practical ideas for integrating social studies into the entire early childhood program.

This book also recognizes teachers' concerns about teaching social studies to mainstreamed special education students, to children from a variety of ethnic backgrounds, and to children who are first being introduced to large groups of peers in day-care settings, preschools, and primary-grade classrooms. Each contributor has many years' experience teaching young children both in North America and overseas and has experienced many of the same concerns. The ideas in this book are derived from those personal, practical experiences. The contributors and I hope you find this book theoretically sound and practically useful. Most of all, we hope that in trying these ideas you and the children will learn more about your social world and will have fun doing so.

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1

THE SOCIAL STUDIES AND THE CHILD

When you think of “social studies” from your own preschool and elementary school days, what memory surfaces first? Some preservice early childhood teachers have said:

- Making maps. “In the third grade I made a map out of plaster of paris. It was so heavy I staggered around trying to move it over to the table where we displayed our maps, but I was so proud of it.”
- Making projects. “Remember the igloo out of sugar cubes Johnnie built in the second grade?”
- Thick social studies books with lots of questions to answer. “When you got to the end of a unit you dreaded all those questions in the review section.”
- Field trips. “I really liked going to visit the newspaper offices and seeing the presses printing that afternoon’s paper. For a long time I really wanted to be a printing press operator when I grew up.”
- Reports. “Beginning in the second grade I had to write a report on Abraham Lincoln, year after year.”
- Community helpers. “I was so impressed by the fire engine and the firefighter driving it. They visited our school when we were studying about firefighters in kindergarten.”
- Discussions. “My third grade teacher liked having discussions about current events and people in the news. We sometimes got on far-off tangents but it was really interesting.”

"Social studies" was fun sometimes and boring at others. It involved doing as well as reading, visiting and visitors, talking and thinking. It was about people—Abraham Lincoln (over and over again!), the firefighter, the printing press operator, people in the news—what they did and maps of where they lived.

WHAT THE SOCIAL STUDIES ARE

The social studies were and are "social" because they deal with our social lives. They investigate the ways in which we adapt to each other and come to understand ourselves. All of the many definitions of the social studies reflect our roles as member-citizens of our society (Barr, Barth, & Shermis, 1977, p. 69; Engle, 1976, p. 234; Kenworthy, 1980, p. 6; Michaelis, 1985, p. 2). In 1983 the Task Force on Scope and Sequence of the National Council for the Social Studies developed this definition:

The social studies may be defined as an area of the curriculum that derives goals from the nature of citizenship in a democratic society and links to other societies, draws content from the social sciences and other disciplines, and reflects personal, social, and cultural experiences of students.

This definition highlights the function of the social studies as developing students' understanding of the society in which they live. It will serve as the definition on which this book is based. In this book the early childhood years will be defined as the years from birth to age 8, a span recognized by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (1982, p. xii).

A definition of the social studies is abstract. It requires a wide range of concrete experiences if we are to understand it. Each of us will tend to define it in terms of our own experiences. Our remembrances of social studies activities when we were children help us to make the abstract definition concrete.

Because each of us has different memories and different experiences, it's important to begin with a formal definition so we all have the same reference point. Using this reference point we can evaluate the kinds of experiences we have had and plan experiences for our students. If we remember our social studies experiences as being centered on reading a thick text and answering questions, we can wonder whether we weren't just shuffling words around and perhaps never really did "do" social studies. How can we ensure that our students will have concrete social studies experiences that encourage them to explore their social world? If we have pleasant memories of a lingering interest in newspapers following a field trip, for example, we will want to concretize our definition by making sure our students have experiences in the social world that will generate similar enthusiasm in them. The social studies for young children must be concrete, involving children in doing and experiencing. The social studies must help children become active, competent members of their family, community, nation, and world (see Figure 1-1).



FIGURE 1-1

The social studies help us understand how we all depend on one another.

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE SOCIAL STUDIES

Examining the characteristics of the social studies can help us to concretize our definition. The social studies have the following characteristics:

- They involve a search for patterns in our lives.
- They are a natural human activity, a naturally occurring part of our lives.
- They involve both content and processes of learning.
- They are based on information.

- They require information processing.
- They require decision making and problem solving.
- They are concerned with the development and analysis of one's own values.

A Search for Patterns

A pattern is a regular activity that has occurred in the past and can be expected to occur again in the future. The world is full of patterns, such as these:

- People wear more, and heavier, clothes in winter.
- As groups of people get larger, specialization of occupations occurs.
- People try to understand their environment by making a mental map of it.
- People are satisfied when their needs are met.

Children are inundated by information about the world. They must organize it in order to make sense of it and to be able to use it. Children look for patterns. Very young children often badger adults with “why” questions. “Why didn't you say ‘Hello’ back to Mrs. Greenbaum?” “Why is that boy blind?” In order to understand their social world children must identify the patterns existing in that world. These patterns may be accepted or challenged but first they must be discovered. In social studies we try to help children find these patterns in our social world, understand them, and analyze them. We build the foundation upon which children can eventually make a rational decision to accept, reject, or modify a pattern.

A Basis in Natural Human Activity

The search for patterns in our social world is a naturally occurring part of everyday life. For many, the social studies conjure up pictures of historians pouring over dusty documents. Historians often work with dusty documents searching for patterns in events past, but this is not an accurate picture of the search exemplified by the social studies.

Social studies are built on the human tendency continuously to structure our experience, to search for and impose patterns on the social world around us. This search begins at an early age and continues through life. The young child trying to understand family relationships such as “grandmother” and “uncle” is involved in a search just as difficult as that of the historian. The older child, trying to understand the role of appointed officials in local government, is also involved in a search for patterns. The effort to understand through finding patterns in the information we have is constant. The social studies assist children in this effort as it addresses the social world they live in.